ED 423 171 DISCOVERY MOTIVATES AND ENABLES STUDENTS TO WRITE ABOUT THEMES IN SOCIAL STUDIES.

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DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 171 SO 028 551

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| AUTHOR | Byer, John L. |
| TITLE | Discovery Motivates and Enables Students To Write about Themes in Social Studies. |
| PUB DATE | 1996-10-00 |
| NOTE | 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Hattiesburg, MS, October 1996). |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Active Learning; *College Instruction; College Students; *Discovery Learning; Experiential Learning; Higher Education; *Social Studies; *Student Participation; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Evaluation |

ABSTRACT

Students' interest and involvement in social studies may be increased by motivating them to write about important topics which relate to their own life experiences. This article presents a general approach to writing instruction which may heighten students' curiosity to discover important topics in social studies as a relevant outgrowth of their life experiences. Teaching suggestions for assisting students' use of information collected during discovery to write reports are included. Sources include books and articles from professional journals. According to books, recent professional journal articles and empirical tests cited in this article, offering students supportive assistance to flexibility write about topics which stem from their own interests motivates them toward increased engagement and achievement in social studies. (EH)

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ED 423 171

# Discovery Motivates and Enables Students to Write About Themes in Social Studies

Flexible Writing Process

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SO 028 551

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October, 1996

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## Abstract

Students' interest and involvement in social studies may be increased by motivating them to write about important topics which relate to their own life experiences. This article presents a general approach to writing instruction which may heighten students' curiosity to discover important topics in social studies as a relevant outgrowth of their life experiences. Teaching suggestions for assisting students' use of information collected during discovery to write reports are included. Sources include books and articles from professional journals. According to books, recent professional journal articles and empirical tests cited in this article, offering students supportive assistance to flexibly write about topics which stem from their own interests motivates them toward increased engagement and achievement in social studies.

Many students perceive social studies as irrelevant due to the absence of connections with their intrinsic goals and interests (Dewey 1916, VanSickle 1991). Past attempts to motivate students toward active involvement in social studies have met difficulties because topics students were asked to research were inapplicable to their lives (Beyer 1994). The problem is to find activities, conditions, and materials which motivate students toward an active and interested quest for knowledge (Dewey 1913). This paper offers teaching suggestions which encourage students to write about the effects of inventions by starting with the effects of technology on their own lives. Linking students' existing experiences and interests with technology to prewriting activities stimulates their initial involvement in writing about the influence of inventions on American history. Flexible prewriting activities mitigate the initial difficulty of writing.

Concurring that relevant topics and involving prewriting activities bolster students' motivation and capability to compose essays, Donald M. Murray (1982) emphasized the desirability of students discovering their own meanings by engaging in the writing process stages of prewriting, writing and revising. Rather than using Hillocks's (1986) approach of methodically teaching task-specific procedural knowledge to prepare students for written compositions, Donald M. Murray (1982) supports teachers' essentially nondirective and general writing guidance

which stimulates students to discover ideas while developing their capacities to generate written compositions. Bringing concreteness to the decades-old debate over the effectiveness of general procedures and task-specific procedures, Murray advocates general guidance which engages students in creating meaningful purposes though composing while Hillocks advocates specific and direct instruction which moves students toward teacher-determined writing goals (Smagorinsky, 1991). The writing process instruction for social studies promoted by this article may be considered in the context of controversy concerning the effectiveness of general and flexible teaching approaches (i.e. Murray) and the effectiveness of technical and highly structured teaching approaches (i.e. Hillocks).

## Discovery Motivates Students to Investigate Topics in Social Studies

Students' initial interest and cognitive involvement can be gained by presenting a problemmatic question which demands an answer. Inquiry emanates from curiosity that demands satisfaction (Beyer 1971). However, past attempts to meaningfully structure inquiry involved having students follow a complicated approach of the social sciences which involved: problem identification, hypothesis development, hypothesis testing and conclusion development. Data gathering for hypothesis testing was a major focus (Beyer 1971).

Professor Beyer (1994), suggested a more flexible use of discovery which balances the old inquiry's strict adherance to the scientific method with flexibility to write about topics which include relationships to the students' life experiences.

Discovery is a flexible teaching strategy which encourages self-directed learning originating with the students' own inquisitiveness and motivating interests (Janzen 1995). However, teachers should plan discovery flexibly enough to embody students' experiences while planning inquiry firmly enough to give direction to ongoing educative improvement (Dewey 1939).

In addition to providing a sufficiently flexible framework for discovery, teachers need to help students select things from their present experiences which present new problems that demand solutions (Dewey 1939). Real problems arising from students' life experiences motivate their active involvement by personalizing the importance of problems being studied (Shaver 1992). According to Dewey (1939), discovery fosters progressive development of students' educative growth provided that two conditions are met. The problem must stem from students' present experience and the problem must kindle students' interests in actively investigating and writing about the problem.

The positive and negative effects of technology on students' lives can link their existing experiences to curiosity about a topic in social studies such as the influence of inventions on American history. Students have personal

experience with recent technological inventions such as: stereo equipment, video equipment, computers, and modern automobiles. Benefits and problems which students are experiencing with recent inventions can connect their existing interests with curiosity to learn about the influence of inventions on American history. Investigating the effects of inventions on American history in relation to the effects of recent inventions on their own lives may motivate students to write about the inventions theme as an extension of their present interests. Increasing students' existing interests in inventions by encouraging them to create meaningful written compositions concerning the topic may heighten their authentic interest in learning about core objectives from history which describe how the industrial revolution and subsequent inventions changed the way Americans lived and worked.

This flexible approach to discovery teaching begins by stimulating students to want to answer a question which stems from their own interests. The question of how inventions have affected American history is an important theme which emanates from students' own experiences with recent inventions. Flexible writing instruction may encourage students to clearly develop and reflect upon the question of how inventions have influenced American history.

Flexible writing instruction may also facilitate the students' learning of objectives in history concerning European explorers of America and the freedoms guaranteed by the Bill of

Rights. Flexible writing process instruction may promote intermediate students' understanding of key American history objecties involving large topics which are divisible into content-rich subtopics.

## Flexible Writing Instruction Facilitates Discovery

In addition to supplying a permanent record of thoughts which can be analyzed and reflected upon, writing about a topic permits students to perceive relationships and to make associations between what they know and new information (Davis, Rooze & Runnels 1992). Writing promotes students' discovery of meaning concerning the influence of inventions problem by providing a basis for relating their experiences with inventions to their discoveries concerning the influences of inventions on American history. Students get the opportunity to compare their writing about the influences of recent inventions on their own lives with their writing about the influence of inventions on American history.

## Prewriting Activity for Teaching the Influence of Inventions

Abel, Hauwiller, and Vandeventer (1989), developed RAFT as a flexible prewriting strategy which encourages students to choose the role, audience, form and tense of their composition. By permitting students to write to an audience of their choice rather than the teacher, the RAFT approach to prewriting

liberates students to write according to their own inclinations rather than teacher expectations. A student could apply RAFT by writing a letter to the editor which argues that traffic laws should restrict automobiles while giving more rights to bicyclists. The teacher may initially facilitate RAFT by suggesting roles, audiences and forms for prewriting activities for students who need help with this prewriting activity. Teachers may insure that RAFT as a prewriting activity starts students toward learning objectives about the influences of inventions on American history by asking them to write as a person today who is affected by modern inventions.

Using RAFT accomplishes two objectives. First, it eases the initial difficulty of writing by encouraging students to write flexibly about topics related to their experiences and interests. Second, it connects students' experiences with objectives concerning the influence of inventions on American history. Personalizing the inventions issue as a relevant outgrowth of students' lives may motivate them to curiously seek to discover the influence of inventions on American history.

## The Information Collection Stage

After prewriting, encourage students to research the effects of specific inventions on American history. Some of these inventions are: the cotton gin, barbed wire, the automobile, and the microcomputer. Each student has the

flexibility to choose an invention to research with encyclopedias and the text. Questions will guide the students' research.

'The following questions will guide the students' collection of information.

1. Name and year of invention _____.
2. Name of inventor _____.
3. Describe what the invention did _____.
4. What products or services did the invention make possible?
5. How were certain people and certain occupations affected by this invention?
6. Which groups gained and which groups lost as a result of this invention?

*** 7. Discuss the benefits brought by this invention.
*** 8. Discuss the problems caused by this invention.
*** 9. Discuss the influence of this invention on American history.
***10. Discuss your ideas or feelings regrading this invention.

Teachers assist the completion of this research guide by circulating to help students find the answers in encyclopedias. Students are encouraged to flexibly answer questions six through ten according to their interpretations of the facts. Evaluating this exercise on a pass/rewrite basis with succinct comments instead of assigning specific grades (O'Day 1994), allows teachers to flexibly appraise these research guides..

After completing writing guides, students have collected enough information to plan and develop their compositions about the influence of their invention on American history.. During the planning stage students flexibly arrange collected information in ways which they deem to be suitable for their for their owm manuscripts.

## Organizing Information

Sketches or semantic maps, rather than linear outlines, offer students flexibility to organize and write about their research notes (Murray, 1985). Semantic maps provide flexible organizational assistance which facilitates report writing for intermediate grade students. In addition to helping students identify the main idea and related subtopics, maps provide visual models for organizing report writing.

With the assistance of their completed writing guides, students will draw a map of their invention topic like the map shown in figure one. The teacher circulates around the room to provide the assistance which students initially need to efficiently map their inventions topics. Mapping is a flexible instructional strategy which graphically illustrates categories of information and their relationships by placing the main topic at the center and subtopics at points around the main topic (Pieronek, 1994). Details of subtopics are written next to the subtopics. The entire map gives students a foundation for writing reports. During report writing, students may flexibly rearrange the order of subtopics. The only required order of presentation called for is descriptive facts must describe subtopics. Since many students initially need assistance in developing subtopic headings, the teacher may provide subtopic headings as shown in

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# Figure 1--Map of Subtopics and Descriptive Facts Concerning the Automobile as an Invention

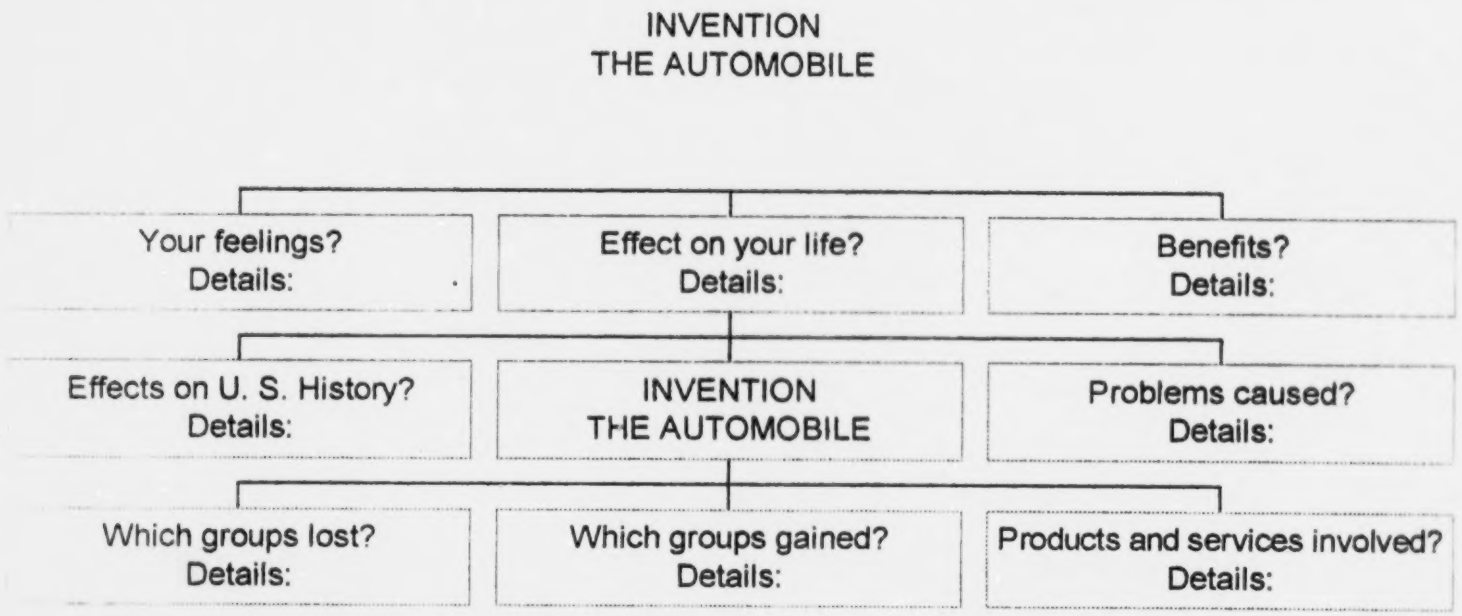

figure one. Students will research details about subtopics.

## The Report Development Stage

After using their writing guides and their RAFT writings to complete their semantic maps, students are ready to develop their written compositions. Teachers assist report writing by telling the whole class that each subtopic they choose to write about should consist of one or more paragraphs which each explain the subtopic. Teachers then circulate to offer individual assistance by encouraging students to start writing about any subtopics of their choice. Providing students with flexibility to write about subtopics in the order they choose encourages their intrinsic interest, involvement and creativity in writing (Dimmitt & Van Cleaf 1992).

## The Report Revision Stage

Report revision involves students reconsidering their first draft compositions in relation to the topic and the meanings they hoped to discover and convey through written composition. According to Murray (1982), students are motivated to discover more meaning while developing more writing skill during revision by teachers who unobtrusively stimulate avid student engagement in the process of doing the revising. Promoting student engagement in revision brings the writing process full circle by encouraging them to think about the meaning of their

compositions in relation to the meaning they hoped to convey. Murray (1982) conceptualized writing as the process of using language to communicate meaning discovered from experience. The approach for promoting students' written compositions described in this article may motivate and enable students to use writing to communicate the meaning they gain through experience. During revision, students may utilize RAFT prewritings, notes from research and semantic maps to help them determine if the meaning they have gained through the experience of engaging in the writing process is adequately expressed in their first drafts.

Teaching report writing as a relevant and flexibly-assisted process may elevate the interest and involvement of intermediate level students in social studies. Facilitating report writing as a relevant, feasible and curiosity-provoking project may motivate students to think reflectively about important topics. This report-writing process may facilitate schema building. As students keep saving their writings about an inventions in their folders they they progressively build a more comprehensive schema. Building an increasingly comprehensive schema provides a solid foundation for progressively improving written compositions.

Students can write reports if they are provided with sufficient assistance with completing a sufficiently flexible writing process. Students in the middle and secondary grades can use prewriting exercises, research guides and semantic maps to facilitate their creation of meaningful written compositions which epitimize inventive ingenuity.

## Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Flexible Writing Procedures

The process for writing in social studies presented in this article closely approximates Murray's general procedures approach to writing instruction. Smagorinsky (1991) provided empirical research concerning the effectiveness of three types of writing instruction -- models, general procedures and task-specific procedures -- in improving students' capabilities to compose essays and to think critically. Eleventh graders in three separate American studies classes were exposed to twelve days of writing instruction according to either models, general procedures, or task-specific procedures. Subjects exposed to writing instruction according to models were presented with an outline of a five paragraph theme along with high quality writing examples from published authors. Subjects exposed to the general procedures treatment received training in the procedures of freewriting and brainstorming to generate criteria and examples. Revision strategies were also taught. Subjects who recieved the task-specific treatment were taught sequential steps for studying examples to generate criteria and counterexamples. Revision tactics were also taught.

Using ANOVAs to quantitatively test the effectiveness of models, general procedures, and task-specific procedures as writing instruction approaches, Smagorinsky (1991), found no statistically significant differences in the

improvement scores for essay composing among the three treatment groups. However, an ANOVA which tested for critical thinking improvements in the three treatment groups' writings revealed that the subjects exposed to general procedures and the subjects exposed to task-specific procedures achieved statistically significant increases in critical thinking.

## Discussion

Empirical research has indicated that general procedures and task-specific procedures have contributed to sizable (but not statistically significant) increases in secondary students' essay composing capabilities. Empirical research has also indicated that general procedures and task-specific procedures have contributed to statistically significant average increases in critical thinking. Featuring prewriting exercises, guided research, semantic maps, and flexibly-structured report writing and revision, the flexible writing process approach advocated in this article closely mirrors Murray's general procedures as an approach to writing instruction.

General writing process instruction requires less instructional time than task-specific writing instruction (Smagorinsky, 1991). General writing process instruction flexibly guides intermediate history students toward constructing meaningful understandings of American history as relevant outgrowths of their own lives. The central core objectives from American history courses are good topics for involving students in the writing process.

## Conclusion

This article has offered suggestions about how to overcome difficulties encountered by past attempts to actively involve students in wanting to learn about topics in social studies. Using relevant topics and stimulating prewriting activities may stimulate the students' initial involvement. Following John Dewey's (1900) approach by using flexible instruction emanating from children's most educative experiences, this strategy uses a simplified and flexible form of discovery to facilitate and encourage students' research into topics. Supportive assistance enables students to use research notes to flexibly write reports.

This approach addresses three of the difficulties which Professor Beyer (1994), identified with past attempts to stimulate student engagement in learning about topics in social studies. A simplified and useful form of discovery facilitates students' research into topics without attempting to rigidly follow the involved steps of the scientific method. Teachers may provide supportive assistance which students initially need for information collection and report writing. Topics selected according to relevance to students rather than relevance to social scientists in universities increase student motivation.

Using discovery to facilitate development of flexible writing is one means of motivating students to learn about topics in social studies. Discovery stimulates students by encouraging them to create knowledge which they want to use. Occasional use of this approach can compliment the use of other teaching

strategies by stimulating students to develop research and writing skills while constructing thorough understandings of important course objectives in American history.

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